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Summary of 70 answers to a letter of inquiry directed to the deans of 101 selected liberal arts colleges and universities on the subject of comprehensive examinations. Essence of replies indicates that there is a growing feeling in liberal arts institutions that comprehensive examinations should be used to judge the success of the general teaching technique, the student's ability to retain liberal arts principles, and his ability to synthesize his knowledge."						
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An Appraisal of Comprehensive Examinations
in
Liberal Arts Colleges and Universities

A report of the New Ideas Subcommittee
of the Committee on Educational Policy

February 10, 1960
Greencastle, Indiana

De Pauw Univ.

Call Dr. H. for name of call.

ED000403

I. Source and Scope:

This report is a summary of seventy answers to a letter of inquiry directed to the deans of 101 selected liberal arts colleges and universities. In addition to the basic report, which is a tabulation and analysis of answers, appendixes supply the following materials: (1) quoted statements and abstracts from all replying institutions, arranged in "for" and "against" divisions; (2) supplementary data that arrived too late for inclusion in the main study.

Obviously, no attempt has been made to limit this study to a strict counting of yes and no answers. An attempt has been made, on the contrary, to discover some of the factors that contribute to success or failure of a program. It would be useful to learn, for instance, whether a relationship exists between departmental autonomy in the administration of the program and its general effectiveness. Following question thirteen, therefore, and in the summary discussion, part III, are analytical comments that may be helpful in predicting some possible consequences of adopting a comprehensive testing program at this school.

One additional source has been used to supplement this report. Paul L. Dressel, Director of Institutional Research, Michigan State University, compiled in 1955 a pamphlet entitled "The Present State of Comprehensive Examinations in Liberal Arts Colleges of the U.S.A." This pamphlet represents 466 usable replies to a letter which appears to have been quite similar to our own. The pamphlet is referred to as "Dressel" in the text of this report and its figures appear in parentheses where they apply.

II. Syllabus of Questions*:

1. Do you use comprehensive examinations?

Yes-- 37
(301)

No-- 33
(165)

Comment: Of the 33 "no" answers 14 indicated that studies were in progress, 7 were from schools which had previously used comprehensives and stopped. 3 of these 7 are presently conducting studies. One "no" came from a school which does not require examinations of any sort. Dressel lists 46 under study, 30 planned adaptations, and 49 indications of strong interest among his 165 negatives.

* Not all letters answered the entire syllabus.

2. Do you use local or outside examiners?

Local -- 32

Outside -- 2

Both -- 3

3. Are the tests constructed locally, or are they national achievement tests?

Entirely local -- 25
(196)

Entirely NA -- 4
(161)

Both -- 8
(38)

4. Are they oral or written?

Oral -- 1
(104)

Written -- 16
(236)

Both -- 20
(60)

5. Have you utilized machine scoring to any appreciable extent?

Yes -- 2

Partially -- 3

NO -- 21

6. At what point in the student's career are the tests given?

Senior spring — 37

Dressel: Sophomore -- 105, Junior -- 22, Senior -- 243

7. What percentage of students will fail the examination and what is your policy in such cases?

4%-5%
3

Less than 3%
25

Comment: 11 schools allow retakes before graduation.
17 do not allow retakes before graduation.
The retake delay varies from one week to one year.

8. Do the departments have autonomy in the selection and administration of tests, or is this matter under control of the divisions of the college itself?

Generally complete autonomy with some division control -- 31

A rather large amount of divisional control -- 3

Complete divisional control -- 1

9. Is the comprehensive testing carried on in all departments or are some excluded?

All departments -- 34
(232)

Selected departments -- 3
(34)

10. Do testing policies vary according to the size of the department and the nature of the subject matter?

Considerably 16 To some extent -- 9 No -- 3

11. Has the academic tone of your institution been affected noticeably by the program?

Appreciably -- 28 Probably -- 4 Not noticeably -- 2

12. What seems to be the general attitude toward it among the faculty and student body?

Faculty: Extremely favorable -- 5 (40%)
Favorable -- 20 (40%)
Questioning -- 2 (10%)

Student: Favorable -- 21
Negative -- 3 (4%)

Comment: Student reaction, in all but two cases supported by surveys, is admittedly conjecture. "The students generally" is a recurring phrase in the letters.

13. Are there obvious merits or defects in the program?

It seems appropriate at this point to quote Dressel's closing statement: "There is never complete satisfaction with comprehensive examination programs--or with any other phase of higher education . . . Unless the program is under constant study and at least minor modification, it seems to have lost its impact and become but another fixture." The positive benefits of a well-run program are fairly obvious and are stated in a variety of ways by letters in the appendix. The debatable and negative features may be said to fall into three categories: administration and work-load, educational philosophy, and student-faculty relations.

Administration and work-load:

In three instances, increasing enrollment forced discontinuation of comprehensives. Ten schools indicated that the extra load on faculty members was an admitted hardship. Dressel pointed out that grading

essays seemed to take as long as the preparation of sound objective tests; the faculty has its choice of working hard before or after the examination. Hard-pressed teachers find it natural to slight the comprehensives in favor of course work. Thus administrators may tend to view comprehensive tests more favorably than faculty members, but, it is interesting to note, faculties that are studying the problems of such testing are strongly devoted to modification and expansion as opposed to discontinuation.

The abandoned experiments seem to follow a distinct pattern in that, if the program lacks "teeth", it becomes objectionable. "Pass-fail" systems have been discarded, as have those in which the examination has not been a graduation requirement. Failure of the lower three percent may be necessary for success of the system, and a grading system using percentile marks seems to be the most successful.

A striking aspect of the affirmative replies is a direct relationship between departmental autonomy, faculty satisfaction, and longevity of the testing program. Those schools which try to make "a B.S. in Chemistry equal to a B.A. in English" seem to have difficulties. Yet there is an admitted danger that some departments will be lax and others strenuous in their support of the program. Some degree of inter-departmental cooperation seems mandatory. For this reason, a standards committee, Dressel finds, would appear to be desirable, and our study supports this conclusion.

Outside examiners have not proved satisfactory in a majority of cases. Locally constructed and locally administered examinations in which departments have a major controlling hand have been successfully administered at some selected schools for over thirty years. Without fail, the schools in this group are the ones that report the most favorable attitude toward the examinations among both faculty and students.

Educational Philosophy:

The first question asked by opponents of comprehensives is this: Does a comprehensive examination really reflect the aims of the university? Is it really the wish of the school, for instance, to refuse a degree to a student who has done well in course work, merely because he turns in a poor comprehensive? Yet the general tenor of the replies indicated that unless failure is penalized little is accomplished by giving examinations. And the program, when so administered, does seem to provide academic stimulation.

Critics of comprehensives also state that students tend to overload in the major field to the exclusion of other courses as they prepare for the examinations. One solution offered is that part of a comprehensive testing program should involve organizing students:

courses from the first semester on. This sort of restraint would eliminate over concentration. And, actually, the systems of preparation for comprehensives vary considerably. At Swarthmore, the first two years are devoted exclusively to preparation. Other schools allow no time at all for review. Four schools offer review courses to seniors in the major area. (Dressel reports that the single course reviews are seldom felt to be satisfactory by the faculties which use them.) Three schools offer a senior thesis in lieu of the comprehensive. (Dressel finds that the thesis policy is quite successful but does not offer figures in support of his statement.) Several other schools reduce the senior load, in order to allow time for review, but this notion is admittedly optimistic. Still other schools report that the senior year has become a tutorial nightmare; at two schools this is so serious a problem that there is talk of eliminating the examinations. Excessive course preparation and over-standardization of testing procedures are clearly undesirable, for these factors tend to prevent students from synthesizing information. The most generally acceptable system may be one combining a degree of curricular control with a final "reading period."

The question arises as to what kinds of tests have proved successful. The most typical pattern seems to be a six-hour essay test in the major field, followed by a three-hour general or minor area test; eighteen schools use this procedure (Dressel--fifty-six). (The single school that reported three solid days of testing also reported unfavorable attitudes on the part of both faculty and student body.) Oral examinations often fulfill special purposes. They range in length from one to three hours, with the one-hour form predominating. With honors students, orals are used almost exclusively. They are often used, also, as a way to judge borderline cases. Supplementary orals are generally given from three days to three weeks after the written portion. Twelve schools use portions of the Graduate Record Examination to supplement local examinations.

Student-Faculty relations:

The obvious student reaction to a comprehensive examination is fear. Five schools observed significant numbers of emotional failures. The dean of one school, however, pointed out the other side of the case by quoting E. M. Forster: "Death may destroy a man, but the idea of death saves him." The statement seems to echo the feelings of those schools which have the longest and most successful history of comprehensives.

The attitude of the faculty toward the students and toward the examinations is an intangible and yet apparently very important element. A review of Dressel's figures might be helpful. Ninety per cent of the faculty members he consulted thought that the examinations were at

least valuable, and eighty per cent were positive in their support of the programs in spite of the extra work forced upon them. It seems logical to believe that in those schools which have a combined attitude of favor on the part of students and faculty, there will be a mutual effort to construct and prepare for meaningful, synoptic examinations. If attitudes are lax or antagonistic no amount of effort on the part of a standards committee will bring forth worthwhile results. The questions may even be taken from old course quizzes, a practice, Dressel finds, that is the greatest fault in the systems he has investigated. There is a direct relationship in the letters between attitudes and longevity of the testing programs.

III. In Summary:

Dressel's study indicated widespread use of comprehensives in liberal arts schools generally, and our inquiry showed a growing trend in schools of our own type. Of the seven schools in our report who dropped comprehensives (after the war, in all cases), three are reconsidering the decision, and are now conducting studies. Three schools are trying comprehensives for the first time this year, and several answers from schools in this area indicate extreme interest in DePauw's study. Within the minority group, nearly half the schools that do not have this program are actively considering adopting it. But these facts in themselves do not necessarily indicate that DePauw should conform to the pattern, for there is no set answer to the general question of whether one particular school should have comprehensives. And no school should attempt merely to copy the policy of another. But it is also clear that this program has excellent academic standing and is widely respected even by the schools that do not have it.

If it is possible to state the essence of all the replies that comprise this report, one might say this: There is a growing feeling in liberal arts institutions that comprehensive examinations should be used to judge the success of the general teaching technique, the student's ability to retain liberal arts principles, and his ability to synthesize his knowledge. There is also a growing belief that the student should be expected to bring forward the knowledge he has acquired as an undergraduate and present it in synoptic form at the end of his college career. The necessity for his doing so constitutes not merely a testing device, but a teaching device that has, moreover, improved the whole academic tone of the campus. The trend to view comprehensives in this light has by now become so sharply defined that it warrants the most careful consideration on the part of the faculties of leading liberal arts universities and colleges that have not yet taken formal action concerning them.